



Plain Language Commission newsletter no. 45, January 2011

Tip of the month: be highly wily about getting smiley

The issue

When our tip of the month (in *Pikestaff 15*) advised how to avoid (semi)colonic irritation, we mentioned that the semicolon – as well as its more traditional uses – is today a cheeky emoticon.

Wikipedia defines an emoticon as ‘a facial expression pictorially represented by punctuation and letters, usually to express a writer’s mood’. It’s a portmanteau word (blending the sounds and combining the meanings of 2 others), based on ‘emotion’ (or ‘emote’) and ‘icon’. Emoticons aren’t just a modern phenomenon: their use can be traced to the nineteenth century:

- The *National Telegraphic Review and Operators Guide* in April 1857 documented the use of ‘73’ in Morse code to express ‘love and kisses’.
- A *New York Times* transcript from a speech by Abraham Lincoln in 1862 contains ;) but there is some debate as to whether it may be a typo or unusual (but legitimate) punctuation.
- In 1881, the US satirical magazine *Puck* published a set of typographical emoticons signifying joy, melancholy, indifference and astonishment.

Examples

In the West, most emoticons are written like words from left to right, so in (say) ;-) the eyes come first, then the nose and finally the mouth. In East Asia, though, emoticons go from right to left and use a style that can be understood without tilting your head. For lists of common emoticons, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_emoticons.

Of course, there’s plenty of scope to make up new and unusual emoticons of both types, as a trawl of the web reveals:

- _/_ \0/_ represents a shark attack.
- _/_*\0/*_ represents a shark attacking a cheerleader.
- :] ~ ~ ~ ~* represents a frog catching a fly.
- ~(8(|) represents Homer Simpson.
- <|: ~, represents a witch.

Our advice

Is it OK to use emoticons? We think not in business communications of any type, even emails. As research director Martin Cutts advises in the *Oxford Guide to Plain English* (Oxford University Press, 2009): ‘The tone of a surly email is scarcely redeemed by a smirking :-) next to the signature. Let the words do the talking, especially in semi-formal and formal emails.’

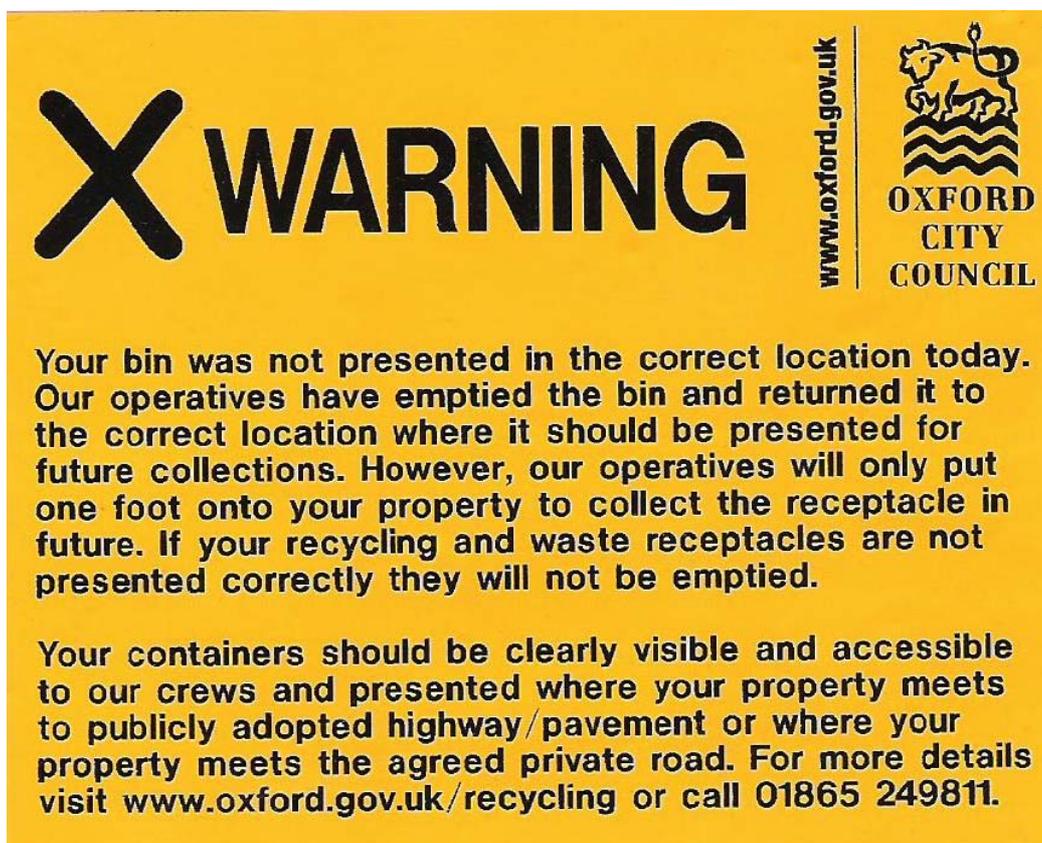
In informal emails outside work, for example between friends, emoticons can be fine, and possibly serve as a useful shorthand – but only (as with abbreviations) if you are sure your reader can decode them accurately. As Martin continues: ‘If in doubt, write some words.’

Next month’s tip will look at other hazards of communicating by email, and how to avoid or minimize these. If you’ve any unfortunate email experiences or helpful tips to share, do let us know! Email pikestaff@clearest.co.uk.

[Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon>]

Christmas competition results

Thank you to all who entered our competition to rewrite this rubbish text:



It wasn’t easy to select a winner from the many good entries, but we finally chose Janet McCarter of East Sussex County Council. Here’s Janet’s rewrite:

Please read this – it’s important

When we called to empty your bin today we found you had left it in the wrong place. However, we have emptied the bin and put it back in the right place. So that we can always empty your bin, please make sure you place it where we’ve left it now, which is where your property meets the road or pavement. Otherwise we will not be able to collect your waste or recycling.

Our staff will not enter onto your property to collect the bins, though they are allowed to put one foot on your property if that’s necessary to reach the bins. Your bins should be clearly visible and accessible.

If you need any more information please visit www.oxford.gov.uk/recycling or phone 01865 249811.

You can see that Janet has deftly applied a number of plain-English guidelines; for example, she has:

- modified the title to make the council sound rather friendlier and more approachable than the original all-caps 'WARNING'
- changed several long words to simpler ones that mean the same in the context, for example 'correct location' to 'right place' and 'operatives' to 'staff'
- simplified the phrase 'where your property meets to publicly adopted highway/pavement or where your property meets the agreed private road' to 'where your property meets the road or pavement'
- avoided the trap of 'elegant variation' (that is, using different words to refer to the same thing, which can confuse readers) by using just 'bin' rather than 'receptacle' and 'container' too
- increased the use of the first and second person ('we' and 'you') to make the notice sound friendlier and more relevant to its readers.

Janet has received a copy of Martin Manser's *Good Word Guide* (A & C Black, 2007) as her prize.

Thanks too to Julia Buckland, who sent us this tongue-in-cheek version of the notice, from the 'Derbyshire Dialect Rural District Council':

'Ark at this me ducks!

Ya dint put ya bin aat proplie tedee, but any rode wiv tuk it this time fer yuz. Bur ah'm telling ya nah, we wanna tek agen if ya dunna pur it aht reet on't pavement forrus.

Us oppos canna keep traipsin all over't yer oction ter fetch it so be a guddun me ode and gee ovva else yowl coppit.

Gerrit? Giz a bell if ya duzna.

Ey up! If you're interested in finding out about Derbyshire dialect, try reading *Words of the White Peak: the Disappearing Dialect of a Derbyshire Village* by Philip Holland (Anecdotes, 2008) or *Ey Up Mi Duck: Dialect of Derbyshire and the East Midlands* by Richard Scollins and John Titford (Countryside Books, 2000).

Articles of interest

Sara I James neatly summarizes the plain-language guidelines in a short article recently published by *Business Comment*, the magazine of Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce:

For *any* piece of writing, ask yourself:

- Do I know who my audience is?
- Have I made it clear what I do – and why anyone cares?
- Have I purged the draft of every unnecessary word? Have I kept sentences to 20 words or fewer?
- Have I used active rather than passive sentences? "Our system will improve your productivity" (active) is crisper than "Your productivity will be improved by our system" (passive). And "Your productivity will be improved" is even worse – you've lost a valuable chance to link your product with concrete, desirable results!
- Have I checked spelling, grammar, punctuation and formatting?
- Have I read it out loud to spot any run-on sentences, clumsy phrases or cut-and-paste casualties?

And *Practical Law Company* has published an article by Daphne Perry, 'Style-checker software: helping lawyers write in plain English'. This looks at why corporate lawyers would benefit from using style-checker software to improve and simplify their documents. See <http://uk.practicallaw.com/6-504-0620?q=stylewriter>.

[Source: *Business Comment* (page 12):

http://edinburghchamber.co.uk/wmslib/news/business_comment_magazine/pdf/BC_Dec_10_Jan_11.pdf]

National Punctuation Day competition

This competition has just announced its winners too. You may recall (from *Pikestaff 41*) that the US celebrated its seventh National Punctuation Day (NPD) on 24 September. While the previous year had seen NPD fans baking off (think dash donuts, period pastries and colon cupcakes), the latest competition asked punctuationistas to write haikus.

More than 3,000 haikus were submitted by 356 people from 9 countries, with 25 being picked as winners. They have received prizes of punctuation 'tchotchkes' (playthings: the mind boggles!), while the prize for most entries – a set of reading glasses – went to a New York woman who submitted 73. Here are some of our favourites on commas (watch out for a future tip of the month on this punctuation mark):

Commas are your friends.
Who else makes you stop and breathe
before you run on?
by Sarah Carzoli

Commas, like good friends,
should be used but not abused
lest, they, turn, on, you.
by Dave Gash

Love life keeps pausing
Shouldn't have bought that copy
Of Comma Sutra.
by Philip Kranyak

Time to eat grandma.
Save her with a comma or
Simply savor her.
by Tom Murawski

You can read all the winning verses at

<http://www.nationalpunctuationday.com/npdhaikucontestwinners.pdf>.

A reader writes

Musing on marks

Thank you to reader Joanna Richardson, who sent us a rather good poem she wrote on punctuation:

Collective Nouns of Punctuation
A battery of full stops, steady and reliable,
A stutter of commas, anxious but hesitant,
A quaver of semicolons, never quite sure where to go,
A drum roll of colons, stealing the show.
A bravado of dashes, streaming across the page,
A shy flurry of brackets, hiding at every stage.
A suggestion of ellipsis, insinuating much,
A posy of apostrophes flying high above,
A query of curious question marks and finally,
A cymbal clash of exclamation roundly resounding!

Talking about turgidity

Joanna also sent us a link to a short 'TED talk' by Alan Siegel, branding expert and business communication specialist. TED is a non-profit organization that started (in 1984) as a conference bringing together people from 3 worlds: technology, entertainment and design (hence 'TED'). It now holds 2 annual conferences (one in the US and one in Oxford), runs various projects, supports TED fellows and an annual TED prize, and has an award-winning website, TEDTalks.

Entitled 'Let's simplify legal jargon!', Siegel's talk looks at tax forms, credit agreements and healthcare law. Siegel claims they are crammed with gobbledygook, and are incomprehensibly long. He calls for a simple, sensible redesign – including plain English – to make legal paperwork intelligible to the public. You can listen to the talk (and read a transcript) at http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/alan_siegel_let_s_simplify_legal_jargon.html.

Linguistic link: Surviving *Unplain* Language

Last month, we told you about *claro!*, a new Portuguese project that aims to make the public aware of their rights and give people the confidence to demand clearer communication. The Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) has developed the following material for its website, advising people how to survive 'unplain' language:

- 'When you get something you can't read or understand...' (tips on what to do if you get a document in unplain language)
- samples of documents written in unplain language, and how members have made them plain
- 'Why people use unplain language' (explaining why people don't write clearly).

To read these articles, visit <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/Samples/unplain.html>.

Plain Language Commission news

Clear Writing throughout Europe

You can now see a video of Martin Cutts's presentation – 'Reaching out to citizens: clarifying bureaucratic language to help the UK public' – at this European Commission conference, held in Brussels on 26 November. Visit <http://scic.ec.europa.eu/str/index.php?sessionno=136f951362dab62e64eb8e841183c2a9>; Martin's talk is at 4 minutes and 20 seconds. Also of interest (and in English!) is the presentation by our Portuguese colleague Sandra Fisher-Martins; you can hear 'Breaking down barriers to plain language in Portugal' at 1 hour, 35 minutes and 35 seconds. We found that the video didn't show properly in Mozilla Firefox but worked fine in Internet Explorer. We're told that you can view it in Google Chrome too. Both talks last about 20 minutes.

In last month's *Pikestaff*, we said that the Clear Writing Campaign was launched at this conference; in fact, it was at an earlier conference that took place on 15 March 2010. Apologies for this error.

Write on

Write Limited of New Zealand has added to its website Martin Cutts's article based on this presentation. See <http://www.write.co.nz/Plain+English/Plain+English+articles+and+resources/Plain+English+articles/Reaching+out+to+citizens++clarifying+bureaucratic+language+to+help+the+UK+public.html>; as we mentioned last month, the article is also available on our own website, at <http://www.clearest.co.uk/files/ReachingOutToCitizens.pdf>.

Having helped judge the New Zealand WriteMark Plain English Awards last year, Martin will be judging the 2011 ClearMark awards run by the US Center for Plain Language. These awards honour the best in clear communication and plain language, celebrating documents and websites that succeed in communicating clearly. The pictures and brief biographies of all 18 ClearMark judges are on the Center's website at <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/awards/clearmark-judges/>.

[Thank you to James Fisher for letting us know about – and helping us with – the video link.]

British Academy Annual Lecture

David Crystal, honorary professor at the University of Bangor, will be the speaker at this year's British Academy lecture, to be held in London on 23 February. Entitled 'Language diversity, endangerment and public awareness', Professor Crystal's paper is inspired by research showing that half the languages of the world are so seriously endangered that they are unlikely to survive the present century, yet only one in 4 people are aware of this. Three specific recommendations are made:

- Artworks on the theme of language diversity and endangerment need to be regularly commissioned.
- A major award at Nobel level needs to be instituted.
- Countries need to build Houses of Languages.

The event is free of charge and there's no need to register in advance. See <http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/BritishAcademyAnnualLecture.cfm> for more details.

Calling all couch potatoes

If the festive season has left you fed up with your relatives, you may be interested in this tempting offer from the Associated Press:

The U.K. has tested several programs that pay people to make healthy choices. Although the trials have been small, officials say they have been successful enough to roll them out further. This week, the government announced it will give out five million 50-pound vouchers to families that can be swapped for fruits and vegetables.

[Source: http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110107/ap_on_he_me/eu_med_buying_better_health; thank you to Nigel Grant for spotting this]

Eggstremely silly statements

Nicole Kidman, in a statement on the arrival of her new baby, Faith Margaret, carried by a surrogate mother, commented:

'No words can adequately convey the incredible gratitude that we feel for everyone who was so supportive throughout this process, in particular our gestational carrier.'

Good job Nicole hadn't encountered an un-PC PC. A senior police officer claims to have been told not to use the phrase 'sure as eggs is eggs', in case it offends women with fertility problems. Writing on his Inspector Gadget blog, the anonymous cop said the term had been banned on 'diversity' grounds.

And speaking on Radio 4's Today programme, Christine Blower (general secretary of the National Union of Teachers) urged parents unaware of the full extent of their children's geography syllabus to 'engage with the school profile'.

[Sources: *Daily Mail*, 18 January 2011: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1348055/Nicole-Kidman-Keith-Urban-welcome-baby-Faith-family.html>; Police Inspector Blog: <http://inspectorgadget.wordpress.com/2010/12/30/political-correctness-gone-mad/>; and Today, 20 January 2011: http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9367000/9367572.stm]

Watch out for more on guff in next month's *Pikestaff*.

Back issues

You can see back issues of *Pikestaff* on our website (click on 'Newsletter'). Here you'll also find a table that summarizes each month's content.

Tell a friend

If you think friends or colleagues would enjoy *Pikestaff*, please feel free to forward the newsletter (or any part of it) to them.

Spread the word

We're happy for you to use any of our articles to promote plain language, provided you acknowledge *Pikestaff* as the source.

Rolling the credits

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